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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM PTER SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA TIES SUCCESS OF HALF PLUS ONE TO CORNERING SYRIA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).  
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SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea told the Ambassador on January 3 that March 14 is at a crossroads: either its members continue supporting the Siniora government, making small adjustments to the cabinet and consequently remain in a presidential vacuum, or they elect a president with a half plus one majority. Geagea believes the only way a president can now be elected is through the half plus one strategy, which he interpreted to mean a return to a candidate such as MP Nassib Lahoud, rather than Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. Geagea clearly prefers starting to prepare for the half plus one election. He cautioned that, even after presidential elections, the (then) caretaker Siniora cabine will remain in office for months, given the difficulties in forming a new cabinet.

¶2. (C) Cornering Syria so that it does not seek to block the election is critical to the success of this strategy. If Syria is not pressured "painfully enough," Geagea predicted there will be no president, and civil strife becomes an even stronger possibility. Not having a clear idea of what the U.S. could do, he did point to important roles Arab states can play in pressuring Syria. March 14 remains divided over how to proceed, he admitted. He was confident that the Patriarch would ultimately support a president elected by a half plus one majority and, depending on Sleiman's reaction, the LAF would not split. End summary.

MARCH 14 AT A CROSSROADS

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¶3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea and his aides, Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme, at Geagea's residence in Marab on January 3. Geagea indicated that March 14 was at a crossroads, debating how to proceed over the next few weeks. One strategy, advocated by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, was to continue with the Siniora government, revamping it with minor position changes. The other strategy, pushed for by Geagea, is to pursue electing a president with a half plus one majority, which would result in the immediate dissolution of the government and the beginning of a process to form a new government. Geagea argued that both strategies will lead to trouble, but concluded that the consequences of a half plus one election were worth the achievement of electing a president.

¶ 14. (C) Geagea expressed confidence that Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman recognized he could not continue as the presidential hopeful indefinitely and would withdraw his candidacy within the next two weeks. He noted that Sleiman told him he would accept being elected without a constitutional amendment, but was ultimately entrusting his fate to parliament. Geagea added that Hizballah did not accept electing Sleiman without an amendment but he did not believe that Hizballah, Aoun, or Syria really wanted Sleiman, a fact now dawning on Sleiman. Eager to begin planning for how to proceed once Sleiman withdrew, Geagea emphasized that there would be no president elected unless it was by a half plus one majority. If March 14 does not pursue a half plus one election, he stressed, "We will lose by erosion."

PRESSURE ON SYRIA IS CRITICAL

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¶ 15. (C) However, he added, electing a president with a half plus one majority requires "protection." Geagea defined protection as applying such heavy pressure on Syria that its only alternative is to comply with international demands to refrain from interfering. He was at a loss as to specific measures the U.S. could employ, but clarified that the protection must be in place prior to pursuing this strategy. If the U.S. is willing, he said, it should communicate its assurances to majority leader Saad Hariri and Jumblatt. If there is no effective pressure put on Syria, then March 14 cannot elect a president, he deduced, and there will be civil strife.

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¶ 16. (C) Geagea downplayed Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's January 2 speech threatening some action if there is no progress in ten days. Nasrallah's words reminded Geagea of past rumblings, after which nothing substantive happened, but Geagea gave credibility to a Hizballah threat if March 14 elects a president with a half plus one majority, without Syria being successfully mobilized. He added that Iran is milder on Lebanon than Syria, and therefore efforts should be focused on Syria.

¶ 17. (C) Geagea pointed to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, as key states which could take a firm position against Syria. He suggested Syria's neighbors Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan threaten to close their borders if Syria does not cease interfering in Lebanon. Geagea conceded that he was not suggesting a military option, but "something painful."

¶ 18. (C) Geagea holds little hope for the next parliament session scheduled for January 12, expressing ambiguity as to whether his MPs will attend. He was not willing to discuss revamping strategies, such as replacing assassinated MP Pierre Gemayel's cabinet position, until March 4 decided which direction it would pursue.

CARETAKER CABINET'S TENURE LIKELY TO BE LONG

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¶ 19. (C) Once a decision is taken to elect a president by half plus one, Geagea then advocated revamping the government. He argued that the Siniiora cabinet, in its final days, need to be made as strong as possible, in preparing for a lengthy period in caretaker status. While the start of the new presidential term will trigger the resignation of the Siniiora cabinet, the process of forming a new cabinet will be difficult, given the inevitable opposition demands over cabinet allocations and portfolios. Thus, Geagea warned, we should be prepared for a president but no fully empowered cabinet for an indefinite period of time.

SECURING KEY SUPPORT FOR HALF PLUS ONE

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¶10. (C) Security concerns likely drive March 14 members', especially Jumblatt's, reluctance to pursue a half plus one strategy, admitted Geagea. He added that Hariri's concentration on the office of the prime minister make him less interested in a half plus one election: in Hariri's view, a weaker president is fine, since he sees the office of less importance than the premier. Hariri would thus prefer not taking the risk of a half plus one election, so that he can become PM without the controversy and possible clashes of such a presidential election. But without a half plus one election, Geagea argued, the status quo continues, with neither a president nor Hariri as PM. He insisted that it is critical that March 14 not lose further momentum by stalling on the presidency.

¶11. (C) Geagea expected that Maronite Patriarch Sfeir will ultimately support the president once he is elected. Khoury reported separately to PolOff that he visited the Patriarch earlier the same day, and while the Patriarch would not explicitly say he supported a half plus one strategy, Khoury determined that the Patriarch would post-facto support the outcome. Anticipating how the LAF would react, Geagea believed some would stay in their barracks, but much of their response depends on Sleiman's attitude.

¶12. (C) Nassib Lahoud remains Geagea's preferred half plus one candidate, but he wants to defer to a united March 14 decision. Geagea expressed confidence that March 14 could secure a half plus one majority, believing MP and Transportation Minister Mohammed Safadi, MP Robert Ghanem, and MP Boutros Harb would all vote for the agreed-upon candidate (all have previously expressed reservations about half plus one). Geagea suspected that MP Michel Murr, whose alliance with the opposition is seen as tenuous, would not back Lahoud's candidacy, and would be even less likely to support Justice Minister Charles Rizk than Lahoud or Ghanem. He concluded that Murr is still holding out for a Sleiman candidacy. He expressed hope that someone could persuade Murr to bring half of Aoun's bloc for a "half-plus-plus" election (i.e., joining the March 14 majority) on some candidate. But he admitted that he is not in the best position to work on Murr, given his involvement in trying to assassinate him during Lebanon's civil war.

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COMMENT

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¶13. (C) Geagea, concerned about his own popularity, was never enthusiastic about a Michel Sleiman presidency, given the probability that Sleiman as president would probably attract support in part at Geagea's expense. Geagea is even less enamored with an extended presidential vacuum, which he believes will be used to erode his credibility among the Christians: according to March 8-Aounist propaganda, March 14 prefers the presidential vacancy in order to allow the Sunni-led cabinet to monopolize power. Geagea must worry that such charges will start to sound plausible the longer the vacuum continues. As he hopes to build a larger Christian base, Geagea will not want to be seen as complicit or mere window dressing in what will be played as a Hariri-Jumblatt plot to deprive the Christians of their proper role in Lebanese politics.

¶14. (C) Thus, gazing at Lebanese politics from his sectarian perspective, Geagea concludes that -- assuming the international community can somehow corner Syria -- the risks of a half plus one presidential election are far less than the risks of an extended presidential vacuum. He is not particularly concerned with the other part of his analysis, that the Siniora cabinet will remain indefinitely in caretaker status because of the difficulties in getting

agreement on a new cabinet. But, from a Muslim perspective, Saad Hariri would undoubtedly draw different conclusions. Hariri would place higher priority on getting the "right" prime minister -- meaning himself -- in place as quickly as possible. To do so, Hariri, like Geagea, needs presidential elections to begin the process. But Hariri would probably accept lower standards on the person of the president, if that meant taking fewer risks in getting a president and paving the way for a smoother start in his premiership. Unfortunately, in the current environment, Geagea's ambitions for a strong, half plus one president ASAP and Hariri's ambitions to become prime minister as quickly as possible both seem unlikely to be realized.

FELTMAN